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# Communicating CSR activities: A rhetorical perspective

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## Abstract

The last 15 years have seen an increase in the production of CSR reports (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Bebbington, Larringa, & Moneva, 2008), both in terms of the number of organisations making disclosures and also in terms of the volume of information being published (Deegan, Rankin, & Tobin, 2002), however, this has also resulted in calls for greater transparency (Chen & Bouvain, 2009). This issue of transparency is a considerable issue in relation to CSR communication, given the rise in what scholars term the ‘Catch 22 of CSR communication’ (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). This refers to that fact that although there is an increased expectation for organisations to disclose information (Dawkins & Fraas, 2008; Morsing et al., 2008; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2007), stakeholders can often be highly sceptical of those organisation seen to be communicating their CSR practices (Morsing et al., 2008; Tixier, 2003).

Hence, the challenge for both scholars and practitioners is to create strategies for effective CSR communication that will minimize scepticism, whilst still continuing to convey the intrinsic motives behind organisations’ CSR practices (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010). Given there is very little research to assist organisations and managers in how to approach the complexity of CSR communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), and that calls have been made to address the “how” (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010, p. 21) of CSR communication, a number of scholars are now focusing their attention on developing strategies for effective CSR communication. As a result, CSR research has begun to shift from understanding ‘why’ and ‘what’ to ‘how’ best to adopt strategies and practices that support CSR decisions within organisations (Basu & Palazzo, 2008; Maon et al., 2010; Lindgreen & Swaen, 2010).

According to Ihlen (2011), rhetoric is a useful starting point for those that wish to charter the terrain of textual CSR strategies, and can aid in developing an understanding as to how organisations communicate about CSR in the way that they do. To date however, the research that has linked CSR communication and rhetoric has been limited to the study of ethos, and has not considered how claims about CSR practices are supported by ethos, logos, and/or pathos (Ihlen, 2011). As such, this research considered the CSR communication performed by nine different organisations across three industries – banking, consumer goods, and energy – and evaluates the different rhetorical techniques – including ethos, logos, and pathos – used in relation to the organisations’ CSR activities.

While this research was limited to CSR reports, this study found that CSR communication is an increasingly dynamic and complex area, with organisations having to negotiate the difficult task of responding to multiple stakeholders, often with varying requirements, within the one document. Indeed, while it has been argued that the intended audiences for CSR communication are generally expert audiences, which in turn allows the organisation to communicate indirectly with the public (Morsing et al., 2008), increasingly, we are seeing organisations using CSR reports as a forum to communicate with regulators, shareholders, customers, employees, NGOs, and as a means to illustrate that they are complying with professional guidelines. For this reason, the rhetoric used in CSR reports is considerably varied as a result of the organisation trying to rationalise and justify

that it is meeting the needs of various stakeholders.

In conducting this research, it was found that while the organisations did use their CSR reports to communicate to a range of stakeholders, much of the report was devoted to trying to build the organisation's credibility in the eyes of its shareholders, customers, and employees, with the occasional mention that they were also conforming to the requirements of regulators and professional guidelines that they had voluntarily adopted. As such, although this research did consider the reports from a number of different industries, it found that the organisations in these industries used similar rhetorical devices to help rationalise and justify their CSR activities.

In all cases, it was found that the organisations utilised predominately logos throughout their reports, regardless of why the activity was performed, and who the communication was aimed at. Typically, the reports followed that format of the organisation presenting a claim about what they had done in relation to a certain CSR activity, and then backing this claim up with evidence and examples to illustrate how they had performed this activity and the results that had been achieved. In saying this, differences were generally noted in how the organisations used rhetoric to rationalise and justify their evidence and examples. Typically, this depended on the types of stakeholders to which the organisation was trying to appeal to.

The results showed that where the activity was conducted as a result of specific government legislation, such as the reporting on greenhouse gas emissions, the organisations tended to use technical language, such as jargon, statistics and data. Here, the language relied heavily on logos, and was straight to the point, with very little argumentation used to try to rationalise or justify the results. Furthermore, the organisations would often signal that they were required to communicate about their results as a requirement of legislation, which in itself, served as a means to build their credibility with other stakeholders.

Where the report was aimed predominately at shareholders, which was the case for two of the organisations considered in this study (one being from the energy industry and the other from the consumer goods industry); the language also relied heavily on logos. What the results tended to show was that even though the organisation signalled that it responded to the needs of a variety of stakeholders, including customers and employees, it used logos to rationalise and justify why it was performing an activity in terms of the impact that activity would have on its bottom line. Hence, the language tended to be full of jargon, and remained quite technical.

While two of the reports relied heavily on justifying activities back to the value for shareholders, the majority of the reports used language which tried to build the credibility of the organisation and present it as a 'moral' company, who readily listened and responded to the needs of its local communities, customers, and employees. To do this, the organisations utilised ethos as a supporting device alongside logos, with techniques such as similitude, ingratiation, expertise, and self-criticism. Of these strategies, the predominate strategies the organisations used was similitude, which is where the organisation used pronouns to try to portray similarities between itself and the audience. Around issues of particular contention, such as health and safety, human rights, and community investment, the organisation would also try to build its credibility by referring third party frameworks and guidelines, to show that it was acting in line with norms.

Interestingly, pathos, which is centred on emotive appeals, was not used to a great extent by the organisations. In fact, if it was used, it was generally in the form of a narrative case study to assist in illustrating what the organisation had done. It is worth noting however, that in all three industries, at least one organisation utilised a narrative case study to further illustrate a CSR practice. Typically, this was in relation to the communication of community investment activities.

On a final note, while this study provided insights into the rhetorical devices used in relation to specific CSR activities in an attempt to show what some of the leading Australian organisations in CSR are doing, and how communication can be used to rationalise and justify practices; it did find that in most cases, organisations

are not conveying the intrinsic motives behind engaging in CSR practices. This research revealed that much, if not all, of what is being performed under the banner of CSR actually stems from professional guidelines, such as the GRI, and government legislation. Unfortunately, this is rarely mentioned by organisations, particularly the organisations included in this study, which are considered to be amongst the leaders in CSR. Instead, they chose to utilise language in an attempt to portray that they are 'moral' organisations who respond to the needs and wants of their stakeholders. As such, while this study offers insights into how rhetorical devices can be used to rationalise and justify CSR activities based on what organisations are currently doing, organisations will continue to face scepticism from members of the public if they fail to reveal the true intentions and motivations behind the adoption of certain CSR activities.